

The Reality of Christmas

A Study in Mythology

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THE REALITY OF CHRISTMAS

A Study in Mythology

CHRISTMAS is a word full of profound meaning. It strikes at the heart of memory and evokes images full of feeling. Through these we translate the Christmas story, giving it individual coloring and bias, but in so doing we unconsciously make use, each in his own way, of symbols which are in effect entrances into the archetypal world, which is the Mind of God.

The whole Christmas story, in whatever way it is presented, is the story of you and me. You and I are in a certain sense the Child who is born, His parents, and all the other characters who appear in the legend. The legend has come down to us much more through myth than through history, for history is of time, whereas myth is the expression of deep spiritual needs and hence belongs to the eternal and is beyond the ravages of time.

If one studies the matter it is quite obvious that December 25th is not a historical date for the birth of Christ. One writer states that no less than 136 different days have, at various times, been taken as the historical birthday of Jesus. Finally December 25th was arbitrarily chosen in 345 A.D. It happens to be approximately the date of the Winter Solstice as it was in the calendar before it was reformed by Pope Gregory in 1582. Today it is only a few days later. The previous or Julian Calendar is still used in Russia, where Christmas is now twelve days later than our own. The link with the movement of the sun further strengthens the assertions of students of mythology that in essence the Christian year cannot be taken as corresponding to historical dates; it is much more allegorical, and in that sense it is a version of the Sun Myths which are found in all religions, and at all times throughout history.

This is not to deny the existence in Palestine of the great Teacher known as Jesus. It is quite clear that in human history

there appear from time to time personages of outstanding spiritual stature, Krishna and Gautama in India, Thrice Greatest Hermes in Egypt, being examples. Each of them gives a new spiritual impulse of world importance and becomes looked upon as the founder of a great religion, Christianity, up to the present, being the most recent one in time. There is in India a doctrine known as that of Avatars; it teaches that there are from time to time special incarnations of Divine Beings and that the great Teachers, of Whom Jesus was one, would be held to belong to that exalted class. Hence there need be no denial of the divinity of Jesus nor of His special place in the history of men.

IT IS AN interesting phenomenon of human psychology that myth and legend are apt to gather round historical figures such as King Arthur in England, Charlemagne in Europe, and even Napoleon I and Gandhi in recent times. The tendency is for history to become obscured by the myth because the latter represents something much deeper and more enduring in human consciousness than even the most important events in history.

Myth is born of, and rests upon, man's inner experience and latent knowledge. It is a projection from the deeper levels of the unconscious mind, the collective, which belongs to mankind as a whole and which colors and conditions the individual whether he knows it or not. Mythological stories are not just fictional. The characters and symbols are taken from the material world and built up into a story. They are not pure fantasy but dramatizations of an ordered inner world in which we are profoundly embedded, though for a long time we are unaware of it. Myth is the first conscious link between the ordinary mind and that inner world. Organized religion is myth projected outward and embodied in ritual, observances and theology.

Dr. C. G. Jung says that myth is the story of the evolution of human consciousness. Consequently we need not concern ourselves so much with history as with the inner meaning of the Christmas story, for in the latter we can discover the most profound truth about the universe and man.

Christmas is not therefore just a popular festival, a time of

traditional good will, present giving, and overeating. Its essential nature goes far deeper. Originating in the northern hemisphere it occurs as the sun begins to move northward from the Tropic of Capricorn. From then on, the days become longer and the power of the sun increases. This means a change of current in all the forces of nature, both physical and psychic. It is interesting that man has intuitively coupled what happens in the external world with the myth of his own rebirth and of his turning away from the winter of materialism towards the high summer of spiritual regeneration.

It is incidentally worth noting that all the festivals connected with the person of Jesus Christ occur between Christmas and Midsummer, while the sun is still rising towards the northern hemisphere. The festivals of the remainder of the year are of a different order. Christmas is thus the first of the cycle which culminates at Pentecost (Whitsun) and naturally enough is cast in the image of a birth.

THING to remember is that in biblical history, man had existed for a very long time before the birth of Jesus. Adam and Eve are names not for single human beings, but for the early race of men whose descendants peopled the earth, cultivated it, built cities, and in general had evolved a certain culture. Now, at the first Christmas these descendants were being given the opportunity of entering a new phase of life. Their familiar natural values were to become subordinated to something spiritual. Man was no longer to *fear* God, but to *love* Him. Neither was he to strive with his neighbor, but to do all he could to serve him.

This may appear irrelevant, but it links up with another tradition from the Far East which tells us that man in the first stage of his evolution is required by his spiritual nature to establish himself firmly in the material world; but there comes a day when he reaches the threshold of the "Path of Return." At this point, rich with all the lessons he has learned, he begins to turn back towards his spiritual origins and to become once more "one with God."

We are here concerned only with the dawning of this new day, and the Christmas legend in its accepted form is worthy of de-

tailed study. The narrative of the birth of Jesus was principally told by St. Matthew and St. Luke. Very little is to be found in either of the other two Evangelists, unless one were to take the beginning of the Gospel of St. John where he speaks about the Word, as a philosophical abstraction of the same mythological events.

In the form of a story the essential points seem to be first, that Mary was warned by the Angel Gabriel that the child she was to bear was to be a very exceptional one. He was to be the Son of God; while every human being is a Son of God in essence, Jesus was to epitomize this level of spiritual unfoldment.

SHE AND JOSEPH then, in obedience to the civil law, travelled to Bethlehem to be what the Revised Version describes as "enrolled," that is, entered on the list of a census. It was while they were in that crowded city that Jesus was born in very humble circumstances. His parents were clearly poor and simple people. Had they been rich they might have been too much engrossed in worldly affairs and living in comfort to be ready to enter the profound experience which in fact they had. It is often during a period of difficulty and discomfort, of poverty and obscurity, that spiritual regeneration begins. There could be no better picture of such a stage of life than the stable, outside the social turmoil of the inn itself.

The stable was a humble place and, moreover, one which can be taken to symbolize a point of contact and interchange between man and nature. It is a place where animals dwell, but these animals are domestic and in close touch with humanity.

Mary and Joseph were, as we have said, uncomplicated people. They can be coupled together as Adam and Eve were, and taken as representing the Earth Parents who, in some form, appear in many myths. Mary is the more prominent character throughout the gospel story, which brings her into line with the tendency to associate the earth principally, though not entirely, with the feminine or *yin* aspect of life. The Mother Goddess appears in all traditions, and in Egypt was even considered as one of the Persons of the Trinity.

At a certain level there can never be a feminine or a masculine principle without its opposite in the background to balance and complement it. In modern psychological terms Joseph might be said to be the animus of Mary, the subjective masculine component which exists in every woman, as the anima, the feminine aspect, exists in every man. The two are in reality inseparable. So the essential Mary-Joseph represent the immediate and necessary agents provided by the physical world for the higher principles of the spiritual man to incarnate. In that sense, like Adam-Eve, they are the parent of every child born into this world.

Around the central event the various accounts tell us of three orders of physical beings who responded to its inner significance. First were the animals. Nature is quick to respond to any change of psychic and spiritual atmosphere. The animals showed this as they stood around the manger. In psychological language also, animals symbolize "natural" man, i.e., the instinctive nature he inherits from his forebears.

THEN, according to St. Luke, came the shepherds, simple unsophisticated people as yet unspoiled by the intellect which would probably have made them merchants, money lenders, or even pedantic scholars and doctors. In the watches of the night, when the unseen worlds appear to be closer and more accessible to man, they have a dazzling vision of the Angel, telling them that a great event is taking place nearby. They respond without question, and go to the place indicated where they fall upon their knees and pay homage. Many simple people react spontaneously and immediately to unexpected happenings. They seem to penetrate further into the world of reality than the cultured and highly educated whose minds are so active that they effectively shut out the simplicity of the spiritual life. There is often a touching depth and a sense of reality when one sees a peasant praying at a roadside shrine, possibly crude and untidy, which is only too frequently absent from the pageantry of a great cathedral or church ceremonial.

St. Matthew does not mention the shepherds but he tells of the Wise Men coming from the East to Jerusalem, inquiring, "Where

is he that is born King of the Jews, for we have seen His Star in the East and have come to worship Him?" This suggests that they might very well have been astrologers, possibly from Chaldea, if not still further afield; for it was in Chaldea that astronomy and astrology were predominant among the sciences. An interesting point is that these men were wise, which is something more than merely intellectual, but they were not wise enough for an unclouded intuition to take them straight to their goal. They therefore, unwittingly, brought great danger to the very One whose coming was of such great importance. It often happens that highly spiritual people are the apparent betrayers of the cause they hold most dear. Here we have worldly authority typifying what in psychology is called the Shadow, alerted to what appears to be a threat to its existence and reacting violently. Herod, fearful for his life or prestige, felt he must destroy the one who put them in danger. This is in line with the individuals on the threshold of a new stage in spiritual development. They often find themselves assailed by what is, in effect, the unresolved and primitive material of their own personality.

IT IS USUALLY assumed that there were three Wise Men, but Manley P. Hall says that accounts of the actual number has varied very much, at one time being as many as forty people. They are nowhere in the Gospels called kings. This seems a later development of the tradition, yet it is not inappropriate. Three, however, seems symbolically to be the proper figure. One, representing physical life, offers gold, the token of material wealth. Another gives frankincense, denoting the life of feeling and devotion, while the astringency of the third gift of myrrh, can stand for clarity of thought. They lay these gifts before the Child, thereby sanctifying and dedicating them to His service.

In the background of all this is the angelic or devic life. The angels not only guide and act up to their name as messengers, but they themselves, as also in the legend of Gautama Buddha, play their part in giving praise and worship. This shows the importance to all worlds, visible and invisible, of the beginning of a new era.

The Star in the East has from time immemorial been a great

symbol, always standing for Initiation, i.e., a new life. It is perhaps significant that it was not the shepherds but the Wise Men who saw the Star, as they had reached a stage of self-consciousness and self-awareness which the shepherds would have to come to eventually, but only after going through much experience and reaching ultimate disillusionment as to worldly wealth and values.

The Magi were then warned in a dream of the trap which Herod had laid for them, saying that he too wanted to worship the new-born King when in fact he meant to kill him. A dream is often, if not always, a message from one's deepest self which, intuitively understood, may convey a warning concerning one's outer activities. As a result of this the Wise Men retrieved their earlier mistake, possibly saving themselves, as well as Jesus, from serious trouble.

JOSEPH, too, was warned by a dream, and took the mother and child out of Herod's grasp into the land of Egypt. There may be a symbolical reason here, often overlooked, why Egypt was chosen in preference to any other country. Any journey east or south from Palestine means crossing deserts, while Egypt, as well as the rest of the Mediterranean shores, were all under Roman domination, Rome being the civil power and controlling the physical life of its subjects. The key to the choice may be found in Christian Gnosticism where Egypt often appears as the place of material plenty, good food and wine, pleasing to the physical senses. In the past it had stood also as the land of the Mysteries, and of science, though by the historical time with which we are concerned these had fallen into decadence. So whatever deeper undertones there are to the story it may be suggested that the wise parents of Jesus gave their new-born child the opportunity which every baby should have of establishing himself firmly in the physical body in which he has incarnated.

The narrative of the Nativity really finishes after Herod's death when the Holy Family returns in comparative safety to its own country — after which the spiritual stature of the Child becomes increasingly apparent as he grows older.

The essence of this myth is as much alive today as it was two

thousand years ago. The fact that similar myths are found in other periods of history, belonging to entirely different cultures, takes nothing from its value. On the contrary it enhances it by pointing out its universality, as belonging to the perennial philosophy of man. It is true that the details are different in each version, but that is because they are unconsciously adapted to the immediate needs of the culture in which it flourished.

In myth there is always an interweaving of several streams of meaning which cross and entwine in innumerable ways. To begin with there is usually a location in space in which at a moment in time certain events took place. It is as if the divine Spirit periodically manifested in the material world, leaving an imprint which, as mankind responds to it, makes the place holy. We have throughout the world places like Nazareth, Lourdes, Buddha Gaya, and many others, which are held to be, and actually are, consecrated ground. Any sensitive person visiting them must be impressed by their atmosphere. If he is in the right state of mind he may even find himself uplifted in such a way that he experiences something which will remain with him always: a Nativity will have taken place in his own heart, marking the beginning of new and deeper spiritual life. Herein lies the true value of pilgrimage, not to earn merit or remission of sins, but in order to receive help in opening the eyes of inner perception. It need scarcely be added that the physical journey is not imperative. A revelation of truth can come at any moment in any place to the person who is inwardly prepared.

PSYCHOLOGICALLY there are two principal layers of meaning — one, concerning mankind as a whole, and the other, the individual. It is felt by many Christians, as well as scientists, that the mythical Fall of Adam—a collective name for early humanity, not that of an individual — was an essential part of the evolutionary scheme. Had there been no Fall, there would have been no occasion for redemption.

The fundamentalist's way of looking at this story is that Adam and Eve sinned, and incurred God's anger. At a later stage He sent His Son into the world to give mankind the opportunity of

redeeming itself from this original sin by "believing in Him." Such an act of faith would place sins on the shoulders of Jesus who, in turn, would make atonement before the Father and the individual would be saved. This fundamentalist idea represents an extreme, but there are many grades of church doctrine between this and a more esoteric and profound understanding of the myth.

The Fall stands for the descent of the unconscious spirit into incarnation, not merely to be rescued but in order to evolve the potentialities with which God Himself had endowed it. The details of the Fall are interesting. First, Eve is produced out of Adam. The first infantile Man was, presumably, hermaphrodite, in spirit if not in body, though it is difficult to see what use a male body would be without its female counterpart. In any case, after the separation of Eve from Adam, each one becomes either male or female: the two basic energies, *yang* or *yin*, or masculine and feminine, no longer cancel themselves out in a closed circuit. There is a tension between the poles and because of that tension, creative life begins. Eve, the intuitive, listens to the voice of the Serpent. The latter, in the Church doctrines, is equated with evil but in general mythology the serpent or dragon is always an emblem of collective wisdom. Eve's act of disobedience to the commands of God as instinctive Nature results in the dawn of self-consciousness in primitive man. As Erich Fromm has put it, the first essentially human act was one of disobedience to blind, unconsciously obeyed instinct. The Fall, therefore, was an essential feature of man's growth and evolution. Without it he would have remained in the nursery of Eden and never become a man, a wilful, wayward creature no doubt, but one with a mind of his own and all the potentialities for creation (and destruction) which that mind implies.

YET ONLY BY "descent" into a dense body (the "coat of skin" of Genesis I) can man make use of the embryonic self-consciousness resulting from Eve's symbolic act.

The life of man on earth is gradually being understood by the unravelling of pre-history and history, and it leads up to the

critical point where we are collectively today. This point is one reached at some stage by every individual human being. For, unless a new birth occurs in the development of man as a power in the world, he becomes the prisoner of his own mind, enmeshed in the toils of his own creations. This stage, demanding a new valuation and realization of life, is that depicted in the Christmas myth.

That man has indeed gone a long way in achieving mastery in the material realm is very obvious. It is equally evident that if he persists too long on this road he will destroy himself. The word "damnation" literally means "to be lost," not to be condemned to eternal punishment, and this is what might well happen today. If, on the other hand, the collective consciousness of man can undergo a change of direction and begin to look towards the world of spiritual values, the whole pattern of life will be gradually transformed.

Where the individual is concerned the evolutionary process follows the same general design within the framework of the greater whole. Personal experience will be different for each of us, hence the spiritual Nativity which all must sooner or later reach for themselves will take place at a different time and in a different personal context.

IN CONSIDERING the inner meaning of this story each one has to be prepared to do what the Wise Men did of old. He has to be willing to relinquish the comfort of his accustomed mental and physical habits and to travel far and wide through bleak places and deserts, guided by the star of his intuitive faith, until he finds that which he is seeking. He has to allow himself to undergo the intensely difficult experience, not of trying to *live* the story, but of allowing it to *live itself* through him. In this way the discovery is made that the whole legend is the legend of himself. The Christ Child can be born in one place only and that is in the humility of his own heart. Ultimately, no external observance or meritorious act can replace the silent opening of heart and mind to the spirit which is the true self. Thus only, do we ever really learn to understand and release the powers we possess, i.e., to become the Christ

Child and show in ourselves all the mythological attributes which surround Him.

So, Christmas is not just a religious season, a glamorous episode, a time of haunting loneliness, a frenzy of gift-buying and overworking, but stands for a continuous unfoldment of the spirit of man. It is a profound recollection that the undying process of continuous rebirth rests upon the bedrock of man's spiritual origin. It tells him that he has emerged from the Mind of God, unique but unconscious; and in living through repeated variations of the Christmas story, he slowly awakens to a sense of his unity with the Divine Mind, and realizes that he is an integral part of that Mind.

THIS MAY seem farfetched when we observe the kind of power which dominates the world. It is almost as hard to believe when we look within ourselves and see how unlovable we are, how unkind and lacking in understanding. Yet there is a connection between these two things, the outer and the inner. They are, in fact, mirror images of one another, each as real and as unreal as the other. The external world as we perceive it is a collective reflection of our own inner state. That which we are within creates the world outside. In this way what we ourselves *are* is of immense importance to our fellow beings. If by inner reflection and understanding we gradually become more and more living incarnations of the Christmas myth, we contribute to the world something infinitely more important than what we do or say. If we learn to live Christmas every day and every minute, we become light-bringers in the gloom and despair of the world. And as we learn to love truly from our hearts we shall see the power of divine Love at work in the people we live with. In this sense we ourselves, because we love, are *creating* love in the midst of a world torn by hatred and anger.

To the average man, Christmas is a festival at mid-winter. As he progresses he will have the experience which that festival symbolizes, within himself, and at more and more frequent intervals. Any deep and touching insight into life is a form of rebirth, of drawing closer to the spiritual roots of being. Ultimately, no doubt, the Christmas experience becomes so much a part of the daily life of

the real seeker that he knows and realizes for himself that what we call Christmas is the thing which is taking place all the time and everywhere throughout the universe in which we live. It is no longer a human and personal experience, but is one which lies at the very heart of Creation itself.



